

Troping the Asylum

1891. Because she was transferred to Cobourg in 1920, and returned to Toronto a few years later, her "Case Notes" and other papers were filed among more recent admissions. She lived with two of her daughters in one of the Cottages. A third daughter lived in the ward.

The "family," as they were called by Dr. Harvey Clare and other authorities, belonged to the Asylum aristocracy. Their presence, especially the almost iconically Victorian appearance of the old lady, must have reminded staff and patients of a time not long ago but made remote by technological and cultural transformation and by the disaster of World War I.

A photograph, done as a post card, shows the old lady with two daughters, who had been committed with her. They are in a greenhouse, probably on the Asylum grounds. The old lady, seated in a wicker arm-chair, is very well-dressed, in a light-coloured dress and a black shawl with a wide lacy white collar. She wears a white cap and white gloves. She is looking directly at the camera. One daughter, more plainly dressed in a long square-checked skirt and a matching top, sits beside her on a wooden chair, a small purse in her lap. She looks towards her mother. The other daughter stands behind them. She wears a black skirt and plain white blouse. She looks away.

Their story also seems oddly Victorian. Her "Schedule 2" indicates that the old lady suffered from strange "delusions," including the belief that "horses are female." She had been admitted to the Toronto Asylum once before 1891, and had been charged with assault. She was probably an alcoholic. At least the "Schedule 2" mentions that she had recently (ie., the late 1880s) "become addicted to the use of liquor."

The "Certificate" (the original signed by Dr. Richardson) indicates that the doctors had difficulty reconciling her "refinement" (the "Schedule 2" notes her "high education") with her conversation. Both Dr. Richardson and Dr. Watson remark (with disapproval) her tendency to discuss sexual matters in front of her daughters, openly and without embarrassment. These matters were troubling, as they included, according to Dr. Richardson, the topic of "her husband and his genital organs," and his sleeping with his daughters. Whether this "sleeping" involved incest or not is not absolutely certain, since the old lady told Dr. Watson that her husband "was unable to do anything; he had no organ; it was much like a woman's parts." She subsequently ignored (or spurned?) her husband when he was literally "dying at her door."